

Review

Oberlin Musical Union celebrates its 175th Anniversary with Mozart's "Great" Mass in Finney Chapel (December 9)

by Nicholas Jones



When Oberlin's Musical Union was founded in 1837, Oberlin College was only four years old. Its students, assertive then as now, told their teachers that they wanted a musical ensemble. 175 years later, this town-grown chorus, now dedicated to singing the big works of the choral repertoire, is still going strong. It is said to be the one of the oldest continuously performing choral organization in the United States, second only to Boston's Handel and Haydn Society (1815).

Sunday's Musical Union concert, with the Oberlin Orchestra and a distinguished group of soloists, presented Mozart's *C Minor Mass*, K. 427. The so-called "great" mass is apparently unfinished, lacking many of the usual components, including much of the *Credo* and the *Agnus Dei*. Even so, it is a sublime fragment and a demanding masterpiece, an excellent choice for this 175th anniversary celebration.

The chorus, some 200-strong, sang with commitment and energy. Conductor Jason Harris had prepared them carefully. Rhythms were vital and articulations remarkably clear. It is greatly to his and his singers' credit that musical nuance came through as well as it did, with such a large group. Mozart's important *piano* indications were scrupulously adhered to. Occasional pitch problems in the chorus led to some uncertain entrances and some troubles with Mozart's often-challenging harmonies.

As expected, the Oberlin Orchestra played with accuracy and flair. The string sections brought out Mozart's intricate accompaniments, though sometimes obscured by the sheer volume of choral sound. As usual in church-music practice of the time, the trombones played throughout much of the mass, setting a tone of solemnity and intensity (and often playing remarkably virtuosic parts!). The woodwinds, especially the principal oboe and bassoon, and the single flute (which plays in only one movement), were also excellent.

It was in the soprano solos and ensemble pieces that the performance really soared. Mozart wrote the mass for a return visit to Salzburg, showing off not only his compositional skill but also his talented new wife, Costanze. It was for her soprano voice that several of the great solos were written. These were performed Sunday by Oberlin graduate and rising international opera star Ellie Dehn. Her clear, heartfelt voice handled the nearly-two-octave leaps and intricate ornamentation with blissful ease. *Et incarnatus est*,

a quartet for soprano, flute, oboe, and bassoon, was the high point of the performance, an ensemble piece of intricacy and nuance. Miss Dehn's singing was reminiscent of the great Mozart operatic arias like *Dove sono* in its blending of virtuosity and profound calm.

A second important soprano part was sung dramatically by Marcy Stonikas, another Oberlin graduate increasingly heard on opera stages across the country. Dehn and Stonikas were ably supported in *concertante* movements by Oberlin faculty members Salvatore Champagne and Timothy LeFebvre.

Nicholas Jones is Professor of English at Oberlin College and a keen amateur musician.

Photo by N.J.

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